

The Soldier's Tale

Walt Herbert, 2/25/11

Igor Stravinsky and C. F. Ramuz collaborated to write *The Soldier's Tale* in 1918, as waves of soldiers returning from World War One battlefields began to flow into the cities from which they had gone forth. The piece broods over an apocalypse brought on by runaway war.

The narrative that Ramuz selected comes from an old Russian folktale about a soldier on leave who is trying to get home, but never gets there. The story moves on a level of folktale reality, separate from everyday reality. The soldier has a violin; he awakens a sleeping princess and marries her; he is seduced by the Devil. Like many folktales, it's story about the triumph of evil. But what, in everyday reality, does the Devil stand for? What about the princess? What does she stand for? What about the violin? The story gives no answers.

But we can't help ourselves. We think up answers for ourselves, and when we do that we bring to bear what we know and believe and feel. In this way a folktale makes us tell ourselves another story inside our minds, a story that reflects our ideas about love, and war, and home, and evil, and violins.

A folktale really comes to life when you realize while you're reading it that it's also reading you.

Stories about war often include stories about homecoming, and they fall into three

categories, the happy, the sad, and the abortive. The Iliad, which tells about the Trojan war, is followed by the Odyssey, about Ulysses going home, to be reunited with his faithful wife Penelope. It's a happy homecoming. The Iliad is also followed by the Agamemnon, Aeschylus's tragedy about Agamemnon's homecoming to Mycenae, where his wife's lover kills him with an ax. This is a sad homecoming. The Bible has many warrior homecomings: David's homecoming to Saul's court is happy, Jephthah's homecoming --- in case you remember it --- is sad. The homecoming of the Syrian general Sisera in "The Song of Deborah" is abortive. Deborah jeers at Sisera's wife and daughters, who are yearning for Sisera's arrival, their hands on the lattice of the window, because they don't yet know he's been killed.

The Soldier's Tale is about an abortive homecoming.

Perhaps the most famous celebration of a happy homecoming is "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again": "The men will cheer and the boys will shout, the ladies they will all turn out, and we'll all feel gay when Johnny comes marching home."

This song was first published in 1863, to motivate soldiers fighting in the Civil War and to cheer up their loved ones back home. Its publication was a marker of a new kind of warfare --- modern warfare --- in which the morale of civilians is a key factor in the outcome. In the very same year --- 1863 --- General Robert E Lee marched to Gettysburg, hoping that Confederate victories in the North would break the morale of the voting public, and that Lincoln would lose the presidential election of 1864 to a

peace candidate.

As a morale-builder, “When Johnny Come Marching Home Again” was a huge success. It was sung by soldiers and home folks both in the Union and in the Confederacy.

The Soldier's Tale was composed in 1918. Stravinsky had taken refuge in neutral Switzerland from the cacophony of World War One, which had begun in 1914, four years before. Stravinsky was cut off from opportunities to perform elsewhere in Europe, so he created this musical drama in hopes of touring it around small Swiss theaters.

Stravinsky's music marks a cultural watershed, the juncture at which World War One shattered a great civilization. Henry James, one of the greatest of Victorian writers, called it a black and hideous tragedy.

Victorian civilization was grounded in the faith that history follows a path of inevitable upward progress, under the governance of a just and benevolent God. Then, quite unexpectedly, beginning in 1914, this optimistic European world was swept away by a seemingly self-propelled and unstoppable cascade of death and destruction. Stravinsky pioneered a musical language that is aggressively dissonant, melodic lines broken by startling changes of direction. It foresees the harsh edges of Picasso's Guernica, that vast cauldron of cimitars evoking modern war. Frederick Nietzsche captured the spirit of the eruption when he declared that “God is Dead,” the guarantee of a benign moral order in human society now defunct, as primordial amoral forces take

command.

The Soldier's Tale is framed by five military marches, which grow darker and more sinister as the drama unfolds. At times the procession of marches is interrupted by peaceful and engaging interludes, "Airs by the Stream" and "Pastorale" where the soldier finds comfort along the way. Late in the narrative, it appears that the soldier has outsmarted the devil, and stands on the threshold of a happy life. There Stravinsky inserts a Little Chorale, and then a Great Chorale, both of which recast Martin Luther's famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God." "The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him," Luther wrote. But this touching reminder of the age-long faith is drowned out by the "The Triumphal March of the Devil," as the Prince of Darkness leads the soldier off to hell.

The victory of evil in The Soldier's Tale is the victory of modern war.

The Civil War was a dress rehearsal for World War One: in both wars the weapons industry supplied new products that had a momentous and unexpected impact. The muskets available to soldiers in the American Revolution had an effective range of a hundred yards or so; but the rifles that were used in the Civil War reached out four times as far. With the old muskets, defenders could fire one or two volleys into charging troops before they arrived at the breastwork: in the Civil War defenders could fire four to eight volleys. Commanders failed to understand that this new technology fundamentally transformed the battlefield; and the result --- notably in Pickett's charge at Gettysburg ---

was the wholesale slaughter of charging troops.

This lesson of the Civil War had not been learned by war planners by the time of World War One, when the advent of the machine gun had multiplied firepower forty-fold. According to John Keegan, the most distinguished of British military historians, the resultant massacres hardly deserve to be called battles. The classic instance from World War One is simply called “The Somme,” which took place 1916, two years before Stravinsky wrote *The Soldier's Tale*.

At the Somme, Allied troops mounted charges against German positions, to be cut down by machine-gun fire, and this was repeated for four and a half months. The process produced more than a million Allied and German casualties, and a combined death toll of more than 300,000. John Keegan writes that survivors testified “to their sense of littleness, almost of nothingness, of their abandonment in a physical wilderness, dominated by vast impersonal forces” (Keegan, Face 328).

Industrialized warfare produced new stories of abortive homecomings, in which the soldier is shipped back alive to his family, but still does not come home. Those gravely disabled were said to be “shell shocked.” But there was a change even for the relatively competent. Family members would say that the young man they sent away was not the one who returned. Veterans suffered what is now called “post-traumatic stress.” Hidden layers of the mind remain in combat, so that the terror, the hyper-vigilance and hair-trigger aggression of combat suddenly erupts in their everyday

behavior. After the war in Vietnam, veteran's counsellors spoke of helping men “get home.”

So what about Stravinsky's soldier? When he appears in his home village, among his family and old friends, they no longer recognize him. They think he's a ghost, and flee in terror. But he does not become a ghost on the battlefield of modern war; instead, the devil lures him into the world that manufactured that battlefield.

The weapons technology that improved so dramatically, as the 19th century turned to the 20th, was produced by the heavy industries of Western Europe and the United States. As corporate capitalism burgeoned during this era, the production of goods and services was increasingly controlled by a small number of large firms, which offered shares in the newly emerging stock markets, and depended on an elaborate banking system. Financial sophistication was required of those who sought to operate in this new economic reality, but the potential rewards were enormous.

The devil first approaches when the soldier is playing his violin, and offers to buy the instrument by offering a magical book, in which financial sophistication is available. The book discusses bank notes, bearer bonds, collateral, notes of hand, and ---- this is the greatest prize of all ---- the knowledge of stock market conditions before they develop. The soldier, if he trades the violin for the book, will know on Tuesday the market quotations for the end of business on the following Friday. The soldier is catapulted into the company of economic actors who produce and sell military hardware,

and thus derive majestic profits from modern war.

This development produced a new rationale for taking a nation to war, and awareness of this rationale also emerged during and after World War One. Smedley Butler, a Major General in the US Marine Corps who was twice awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, noted the profits realized by the American corporations that supplied munitions during World War One. DuPont profits increased by 950%, Bethlehem Steel profits increased by 716%. And so forth.

War-making in the industrial world could be drastically reduced, General Butler noted, if the government did not draft young men into the military until it had conscripted all the corporations whose products would be required for the war, and put those corporations on soldier's pay.

Stravinsky's story does not pursue these broad social questions. Nor did anyone foresee in 1918 the destructive power that weapons possess today, or that weapons production would become an defining feature of what we call democracy in America. Half a century ago, Dwight Eisenhower raised his futile warning against the "military-industrial complex" that is now as American as our breathtaking inequality of wealth, our huge prison population, and the awarding of free-speech rights to corporations.

The story looks elsewhere, toward the spirituality of the soldier, who discovers that the possession of such economic power has eaten away his soul. The young man becomes a ghost to himself, until he renounces all the wealth that the devil tricked him

into accumulating, and regains his violin. The story concludes with the magical healing powers of the violin, and the soldier's insurmountable desire to go home.

Despite gaining a new home and a new bride, the young man cannot give up his yearning for his original home. He wants to return to the world from which he had set out when he went off to war, as though dreaming of that lost time before World War I, when God was in his heaven and all was right with the world. This desire turns out to be his undoing, and the devil, triumphant at last, marches him off to hell.

So what are we to think, at long last, about the soldier's violin? The devil succeeds in taking it away at the outset. Then the soldier gets it back and plays music on it that temporarily disables the devil, and then he uses it to awaken the folk-tale princess from her enchanted sleep.

Let's take the violin as the human capacity for love and loyalty and healing and creative fulfillment. Let's imagine that the violin represents Stravinsky's power of creating music in a new idiom, in a musical language that commandeers the cacophony of the new order of things, and fashions from it something beautiful.

The devil, after all, like Nietzsche's dead Victorian god, is a relic of a bygone world. But the old violin is not. It is the means by which a new world can be expressed. Stravinsky is not a bit player in the devil's reality: the devil is a bit player in Stravinsky's reality. The violin is an emblem of the unquenchable creative power that comes alive as one world passes into another.